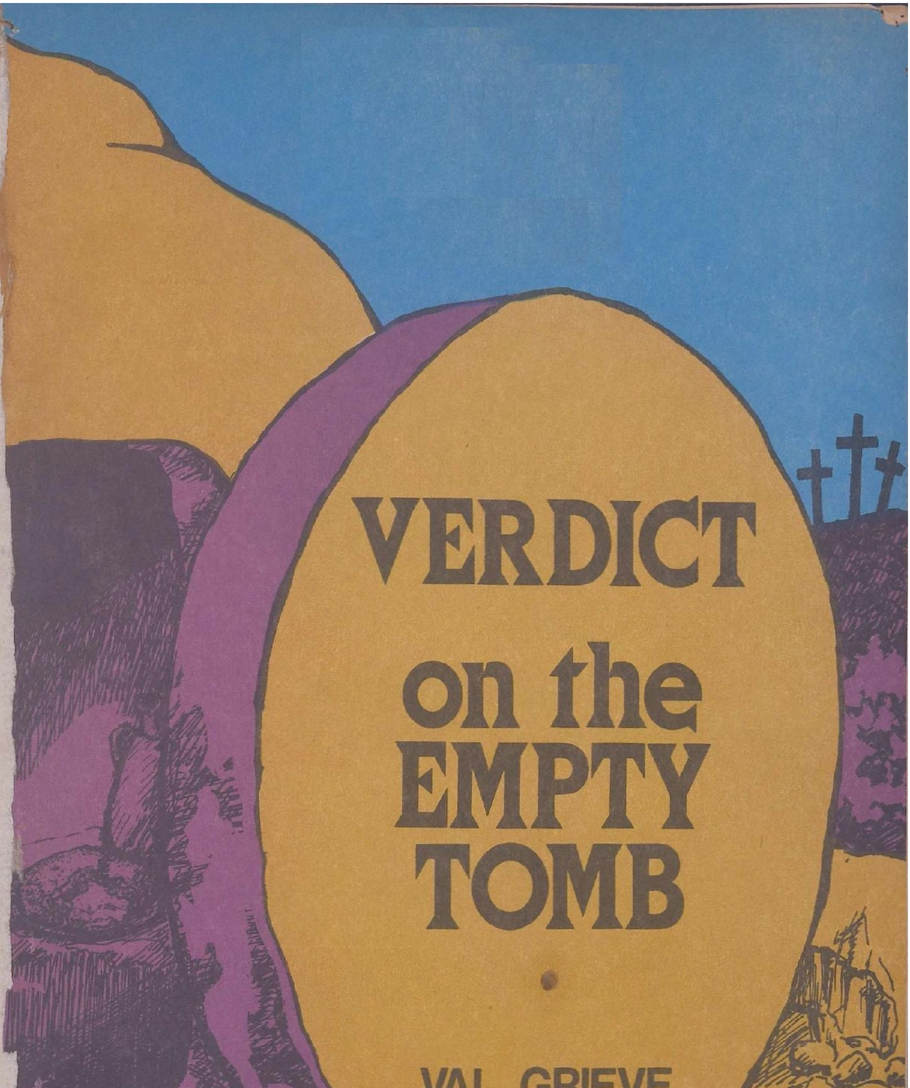
VERDICT on the EMPTY TOMB

VAL GRIEVE



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yer examines the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

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VAL GRIEVE

VAL GRIEVE is a law graduate of Oxford University. He has practised as a lawyer in Manchester, England, for over twenty-five years. Before his conversion to Christianity at the age of eighteen he was an atheist and one of the main factors in his conversion was the evidence for the Christian faith. In this booklet he examines the evidence for and against the Resurrection and you are a member of the jury. But in the end, the verdict is yours.

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The Most Important Question in the World

'If you could meet any person of the past and ask just one question, whom would you meet and what question would you ask?' When once asked this, Professor Joad, then Professor of Philosophy at London University, answered, 'I would meet Jesus Christ and ask him the most important question in all the world – "Did you really rise from the dead?"' Professor Joad was right. The most important question in the world is whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead and is alive today.

To start with, the Resurrection is the very heart of the Christian faith. This really came home to me when I was once asked to speak at a British university on 'The Message of the Early Church'. In order to find out what it was, I read carefully through all the thirteen messages or sermons in the book of Acts. As I read them, I suddenly realised that all these messages only had one thing in common. Namely, that Jesus is alive and that He is changing people's lives. In fact you will find that the Resurrection is mentioned more than one hundred times in the New Testament and nearly every book refers to it. This is what Christianity is all about; that Christ not only lived and died but on the third day He rose again from the dead. Without the Resurrection there is no gospel. As Paul says, 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile' (1 Corinthians 15:17).

Any consideration as to what Christianity is about must begin here. Yet, amazingly enough, in these days when Jesus is in the news this is something we have forgotten. The rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* ends with Jesus in the grave. Incredibly it misses out the most vital thing about the life of Christ. His death was not the end. He rose from the dead. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Michael Ramsey, has said, 'The gospel without the Resurrection is not merely a gospel without its final chapter; it is not a gospel at all.'

The Resurrection also makes Christianity unique. People often ask, 'What is the difference between Christianity and other religions?' The answer is that in no other religion do we find its followers saying that its founder is God, that He rose from the dead and is alive today changing people's lives. Yet this is precisely what real Christianity is about.

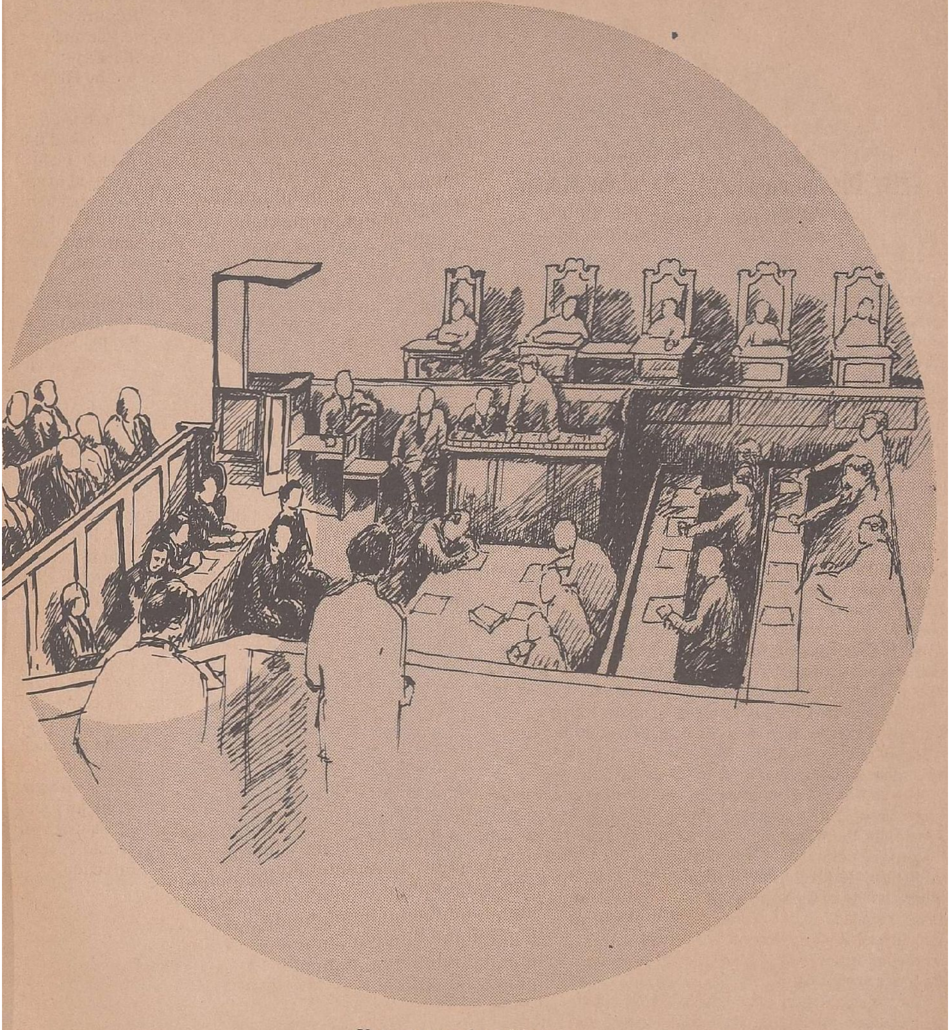
Above all, the Resurrection is the answer to two great questions about life, which all of us must have asked ourselves at one time or another. The first of these is the basic question as to whether there is a God. In other words, is this universe just a closed system or is there an eternal being behind it all? The answer of the Christian faith to this question is that, not only is there a God, but God came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself claimed this when He said 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' and 'I and the Father are one' (John 14:9 and 10:30). Also, Jesus prophesied that He would both die and then rise again on the third day. The Resurrection is the great proof that these claims of Jesus were true and that He was none other than God Himself. As Paul says, 'He was declared with power to be the Son of God by His Resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:4).

The other great question is as to whether there is a life after death. Over three thousand years ago Job asked the question 'If a man dies, will he live again?' (Job 14:14). Ever since then philosophers and thinkers have tried to answer this question, but in vain. Anyone who has not seriously thought about death itself has never really faced the supreme fact of life. As George Bernard Shaw once said 'The statistics about death are very impressive. One out of one dies!' Now, if Jesus really rose again from the dead, this age old question has once and for all been answered. There is a life after death because someone, namely Jesus, has come back from the dead and told us what life beyond the grave is like. Not only that, but Jesus claimed that all those who have faith in Him will live forever.

It is, therefore, of supreme importance for each of us to carefully consider whether the Resurrection of Jesus took place or not. Not only is it both the heart of the Christian faith and unique to it, but it is something which affects our lives both now and hereafter.

Some years ago a lawyer, Frank Morrison, started to write a book disproving the Resurrection. He felt that the evidence for it rested upon insecure foundations. A remarkable thing happened as he was doing research for his book. The sheer force of the evidence compelled him to write a book proving that Christ rose from the dead; the first chapter of which is entitled, 'The book that refused to be written'.

As a lawyer I, too, have for over twenty-five years made a careful study of the evidence, and am equally convinced that Christ really rose from the dead. In his play *The Vigil* Ladislas Fodor cleverly constructs a court scene in which the evidence for the Resurrection is examined. A gardener is accused of stealing Christ's body and evidence is brought in court for and against him. The audience is the jury and at the end of the play it has to give a verdict. I want you to imagine that you are a member of a jury while I, as a lawyer, present the evidence for Christ's Resurrection.



You are a member of the jury

The Jury

Before I deal with the duties of a jury I would like to mention what all lawyers call the 'standard of proof'. Suppose you are involved in a car accident and, unfortunately, someone is injured. You are then sued in court for damages and the court has to decide whether you have been negligent or not. How does the court do this? What would constitute proof of this? In a case like this, we are dealing with probabilities. The court has to decide as to what is the most likely thing that happened. When considering the evidence for the Resurrection we must apply the same 'standard of proof'. In other words, what is the most likely thing that happened?

With this in mind, let me go over the duties of a jury. One of these is that it must be unbiased. It is no use taking one look at the prisoner in the dock and deciding there and then that because of the colour of his skin he must be guilty! To be unbiased in our case is more difficult than appears, as all of us have inbuilt prejudices. A striking example of this is the Frenchman Ernest Renan who wrote a book *The Life of Jesus* in which he denounced the Resurrection of Christ. Yet, by his own admission, Renan started with the presupposition, 'There is no such thing as a miracle. Therefore, the Resurrection did not take place'! Such an attitude would not be tolerated in a court of law. We must be unbiased when examining the evidence.

Above all, the duty of a jury is to give a verdict. In fact, the one thing that a judge never does in a criminal case is to judge. The judge presides over the court, sums up at the end of the hearing and pronounces the sentence. However, it is the jury that has to decide whether the accused is guilty or innocent, and it has a responsibility to bring in a verdict. The evidence for the Resurrection also demands a verdict. We must examine it and make up our minds as to whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

The Facts

Any court case must begin with the facts. Once these have been ascertained the case can then proceed and a verdict be given. What, then, are the facts about Christ? History tells us three things:

1. He lived nearly two thousand years ago.
2. He was crucified on a cross.
3. Three days later His body had disappeared from the tomb where it had been buried.

These facts are borne out by the eye-witness accounts contained in the New Testament. When we consider the number of ancient manuscripts available (over five thousand) and the closeness in time of the most ancient of these to the original (namely about thirty-five years) there is more evidence for the reliability of the New Testament documents than for any other writings of comparable date (see *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by Prof F F Bruce, Inter-Varsity Press). We cannot dismiss these accounts by saying that the writers were Christians. Their evidence should be accepted along with that of anyone else. Otherwise, it is like a judge in a murder case ruling out the evidence of any one who has seen the murder!

In any case, apart from the New Testament, we also have the evidence of non-Christians. It is interesting to find that the first mention in Roman literature of Christ and the Christians is in the *Police News* of that day. According to the Romans, Caesar was lord, but according to the early Christians Jesus was Lord. This brought them into conflict with Rome and the great Roman historian, Tacitus, wrote in about AD 115 of the fire of Rome and Nero's attempt to fasten the blame on the Christians. He tells us that Christus, from whom they took their name, had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was Emperor.

Also, the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote a history of the Jewish nation about AD 90, tells of 'Jesus the so-called Christ.' Recently an Arabic text of his famous passage about Christ has been found, and in it Josephus says, 'At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and from the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and he was alive'.

Lastly, there is evidence about Jesus from archaeology. In 1945 an Israeli professor discovered a sealed tomb in a suburb outside Jerusalem. In it were five bone caskets; from their style and a coin found there it is clear that the tomb was closed in approximately AD 50. On two of the bone caskets the name of Jesus appears clearly in prayers to Him. These prayers point to Jesus as the risen Son of God, who can raise from the dead.

What Happened to Jesus?

These facts are common ground, admitted by friend and foe of Christianity alike. What we have to do is to find some explanation for them, and especially for the empty tomb. The vital question is, 'What happened to Jesus? How did His tomb become empty?' There are only four possible answers – fraud, swoon, delusion and miracle. Let us examine each of these and decide which is the most likely.

Fraud

In Matthew's Gospel we find the earliest explanation as to how the tomb of Jesus became empty. After Jesus was crucified, the Jews asked the permission of Pontius Pilate for a Roman guard to be mounted outside the tomb in case anything happened. Pilate gave his permission, and a Roman guard made the tomb secure and then watched over it. According to this explanation the guard then fell asleep and the disciples came by night and stole the body of Jesus. They then invented the story that He had risen from the dead, and perpetrated the biggest hoax of all time.

From Roman history we know a great deal about the Roman army and its military discipline. According to a Roman military historian the Roman guard was a sixteen man security unit, each man of which was trained to protect six square feet of ground. If one man in the guard failed in his duty, he was automatically executed along with the other fifteen. Members of such a guard were well aware of the punishment that awaited them all if just one fell asleep or left his position. In view of this, it seems incredible that the whole of the Roman guard fell asleep on duty at the same time.

Further, if I as a lawyer had the guard commander in court for cross-examination, I would just like to ask him the question, 'If you were asleep, how do you know what happened?' Believe me, such a story as this would be laughed out of court in no time.

Also, if the disciples stole the body of Jesus, they certainly appear to have been singularly inept. John records in his Gospel that when he and Peter arrived at the empty tomb they found inside the linen clothes which had been wrapped round the body of Jesus before his burial. If the body was stolen, what was the point of leaving the grave clothes behind? Surely, it would have been far easier to remove the body as it was. Especially as time was at a premium with, according to this explanation, the Roman guard conveniently asleep outside! A small detail like this speaks volumes.

Then, too, behind nearly every crime there is a motive. What was the motive here? Nearly every one of the early disciples died for their faith. Why did they do this? They had nothing to gain but everything to lose. Men may die for what they sincerely think is true, but it is another thing to die for what you know is a lie.

Again, if the body was stolen, sooner or later someone would have told the truth and given the disciples away. Yet this never happened, and there is no trace of any place in the vicinity being venerated as Christ's actual grave.

Above all, this explanation is contrary to what we know about the disciples. Their number was down to a handful. They were depressed, afraid and leaderless. It seems inconceivable that they could have then suddenly become brave and daring enough to face the Roman guard at the tomb and steal the body of Jesus. Fraud also means that the disciples were not just deceived but deliberate deceivers, who perpetrated the greatest confidence trick of all time. This is contrary to their known moral character and teaching.

Swoon

We have read newspapers accounts of people who have been thought dead and have suddenly come to life before burial. An explanation at least two hundred years old maintains that this is what happened here. Jesus did not die on the cross, but fainted or swooned from exhaustion. After this He revived in the cool of the tomb, and when He emerged the disciples wrongly jumped to the conclusion that He had risen from the dead. This explanation has recently come into prominence through a heretical sect of Muslims called the Ahmadiya, who maintain that after Jesus escaped from the tomb He eventually went to Kashmir. He then died there at the age of 120 and, without any historical evidence whatsoever, the tomb of an unknown sheikh is claimed to be His burial place. This explanation has also been given a modern twist by Dr Hugh J

Schonfield in his book *The Passover Plot* (Futura). In it he says that when Jesus on the cross cried out, 'I thirst' He was drugged with wine. Again Jesus was thought to be dead, though this was not the case.

Is this so? Did Jesus really die on the cross? Was He drugged? It is significant to find that no suggestion of this kind has come down to us from the past despite all the violent attacks which have been made on the Christian faith. Also, the facts do not support this theory. The Roman soldiers knew their job well. It was more than their lives were worth to make a mistake when dealing with their chief victim. Pilate, too, would never have given permission for Joseph to bury the body of Jesus unless he was absolutely sure that he was dead. In fact, everyone connected with the crucifixion agrees about this one thing – Jesus was dead. They should know what happened. They were there.

This explanation also ignores what to me, as a lawyer, is a very important detail. John in his Gospel tells us that one of the Roman soliders pierced the side of Jesus with a spear 'bringing a sudden flow of blood and water' (John 19:34). This is the kind of detail which only an eye-witness would notice. From a medical point of view the reference to water is particularly significant. Schonfield conveniently ignores this important detail and does not even mention it. He also maintains that the emission of blood shows that Jesus was still alive – but this is wrong as there can be bleeding after death. What then is the explanation of the blood and water? The most probable one is that given by Professor Rendle Short, late Professor of Surgery at Bristol University. He states that:

> As a result of the spiritual and physical agony endured by Christ, a condition of acute dilation of the stomach may have developed and the spear would draw watery fluid from the stomach, and blood from the heart and great vessels of the thorax. Needless to say such a wound would be instantly fatal if the victim was not already dead, as indeed he was.
>
> (*The Bible and Modern Medicine,* Paternoster Press, p. 96)

Then, too, if Jesus revived in the tomb He must have been in an extremely weak condition. Before His crucifixion He endured a Roman flogging which left Him so weak that He was unable, as was customary, to carry His own cross. He was then crucified and left to hang on the cross through the mounting heat of the day. After this, He was without food or water for three days. How then from inside the tomb did He manage to move the huge stone that covered its entrance and escape from the guards outside? Then, how was it that in this extremely weak condition He was ever able to convince anyone that He was conqueror over death and the grave? Over a century ago Strauss, himself a sceptic, admitted this when he said

> It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at least yielded to His sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that He was a conqueror over the death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry.
>
> (*The Life of Jesus for the People,*p. 912)

Finally, if this explanation is correct, Jesus must have perpetrated a deliberate fraud by passing Himself off as one risen from the dead. The previous explanation leaves us with fraudulent disciples, but this one leaves us with a fraudulent Jesus, which is contrary to His known moral character and even more difficult to believe.

On grounds like these, and particularly because of the medical evidence, swoon must be ruled out as a possibility.

Delusion

Delusions often arise due to someone expecting something so much that eventually he believes it has happened. Like the wife who loses her husband. For years she has been used to him coming home from work at 6 p.m. Each night at this time she thinks of him and longs to see him again. Eventually she suffers from the delusion that her husband has come home and spoken to her.

According to this explanation, that is what happened here. The disciples expected Jesus to rise from the dead. This expectation led to hallucination. The whole thing was wish fulfilment and it was 'all in the mind'.

At first this explanation, which is the most modern one, seems plausible, but, interestingly enough, further consideration rules it out entirely. Its basic assumption is that the disciples expected Jesus to rise from the dead. But the reverse is the case. The Resurrection caught the disciples by surprise. They were unbelieving and incredulous. The truth is that it was not the disciples who convinced themselves that Jesus was alive – it was Jesus who had to convince them.

There are certain laws which psychiatrists say delusions must conform to. Generally, only particular kinds of people such as the highly imaginative suffer from them. However, here all types of people claim to have seen Christ, including a hard-headed tax collector, a doubting Thomas, Paul the intellectual and some down-to-earth fishermen.

Delusions are also very individualistic and extremely subjective. It is highly unlikely that two persons would have the same one at the same time. But here we find a group of over five hundred people who all saw Christ alive again at the same time! (1 Corinthians 15:6)

Again, delusions are usually restricted as to when and where they occur. They require favourable circumstances. Here we find that Christ appeared at all times of the day and in all sorts of places; in a garden, in a crowded room, on top of a mountain, on the road and by the sea shore.

Finally, delusions usually increase in intensity and occur regularly over a long period. But here they stopped suddenly after only forty days and did not occur again.

In view of the above, to maintain that the disciples were suffering from a delusion is completely to ignore the evidence. What happened to them is contrary to the usual pattern in cases of this nature.

Above all, any explanation as to how the tomb of Jesus became empty must cover all the facts. This one does not. If the disciples were deluded, then all the Jews had to do was to produce the body of Jesus. They could not do this, for there was no body to produce. The tomb was empty! Our original question 'What happened to Jesus?' still stands. Delusion is no answer to it, as it does not explain the empty tomb of Jesus. It just does not fit the facts.

Miracle

This is the answer of the early Christians to our question, 'What happened to Jesus?' According to them, He rose from the dead leaving an empty tomb. He then appeared to them and changed their lives. A miracle took place. The gospel message is that 'Christ died for our sins according to

the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3,4).

At this stage I must remind you to try to be unbiased. Most people have a basic prejudice against the supernatural and dismiss a miracle as a possibility without really examining it. But if you believe that God exists and that He made the universe, there should be no difficulty in believing that He has enough power to do miracles. Even if you only admit the possibility of God, then you must also admit the possibility of a miracle. And as no one can prove that God does not exist, the possibility of a miracle can never be entirely ruled out. Don't be like the man who once said, 'I have made up my mind – don't confuse me with the facts!'

What then are the facts?' What evidence is there for the miracle of the Resurrection of Christ from the dead? There is certainly much more evidence than most people think. Recently, a survey among students at a technical college revealed that a majority of those who didn't believe in the Resurrection had not studied the evidence! As a lawyer I want to bring to your attention three types of evidence for the Resurrection.

The Direct Evidence of the Disciples

A famous QC once said, 'When I have a poor case in court, I make a long speech; but when I have a really strong case, I simply call the witnesses.' He was right. In any court of law the best evidence is what lawyers call 'direct evidence'. This deals with the fact in issue, which in this case is whether Jesus Christ rose from the dead. The best direct evidence would be that of witnesses who actually saw Him after his Resurrection, and that is exactly what we have in the pages of the New Testament.

It records no less than twelve appearances of the risen Christ to individuals:

To Mary Magdalene (John 20:14)
To the women returning from the tomb (Matthew 28:9, 10)
To Peter later in the day (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
To the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33)
To the apostles, Thomas being absent, (John 20:19-24)
To the apostles, Thomas being present (John 20:26-29)
To the seven by the Lake of Tiberius (John 21:1-23)
To five hundred men (1 Corinthians 15:6)
To James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
To the eleven (Matthew 28:16-20)
At the Ascension (Acts 1:3-12)
To Paul (Acts 9:3-6; 1 Corinthians 15:8)

The evidence of all these witnesses is particularly impressive when we notice six things about it:

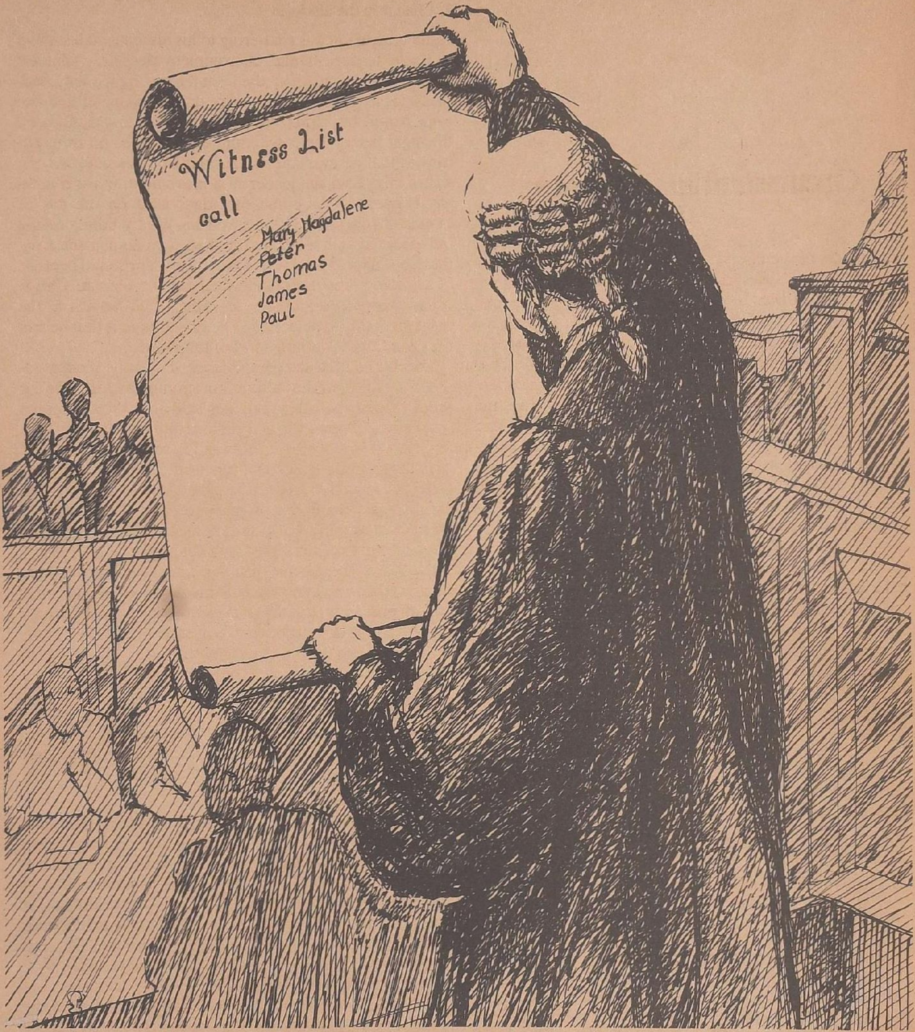
1. The number of witnesses involved. Contrary to what is often said, there must have been over 550 people who saw Christ after he had risen again from the dead. In fact, in chapter fifteen of 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us his list of the witnesses. This list is particularly impressive bearing in mind that there is no doubt that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in about AD 56 and the list contained in it was probably obtained during Paul's first visit to Jerusalem in AD 34. This takes us back to within three years of the Resurrection itself. Also, the list appears to be an official list of witnesses. For instance, it omits the evidence of any women (which would not have been admitted in court in those days) and it states that Jesus 'appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep' (1 Corinthians 15:6). As Professor Sir Norman Anderson has pointed out, 'This is one of the most significant statements in the whole of the New Testament. Paul was no fool, and he knew perfectly well that he had a host of enemies eager to pounce on him if he made any questionable statement. So it is exceedingly unlikely that he would have staked his whole credibility on the fact that there were three or four hundred persons still alive who claimed to have seen the risen Christ if this had not been the simple truth. It was tantamount to saying, "If you don't believe me, there are plenty of people who can confirm this statement. Go and ask them"' (*The Fact of Christ* Inter-Varsity Press, p. 5).

2. Their accounts of the Resurrection are independent of each other. On a superficial reading of them, there may appear to be points of disagreement, but closer examination reveals that they are complementary and not contradictory. This is exactly what I, as a lawyer, would expect from independent witnesses. Any court would be suspicious of witnesses who agreed with each other word for word. What is impressive is when a number of witnesses unanimously testify to the same thing, each describing it in their own way. This is what we have here.

3. These witnesses either wrote as eye-witnesses of the Resurrection or recorded eye-witness accounts of it. On the whole their evidence was first hand and not hearsay. Hearsay evidence is what David told Rachel who told Stephen who told me! Normally, such evidence is unsatisfactory as it is open to abuse, and a story can all too easily change in the telling. As Professor F F Bruce, Rylands Professor at Manchester University, has pointed out, 'The earliest preachers of the gospel knew the value of first-hand testimony, and appealed to it time and time again. "We are witnesses of these things" was their constant and confident assertion. And it can have been by no means so easy as some writers seem to think to invent words and deeds of Jesus in those early years, when so many of his disciples were about, who could remember what had and had not happened.' (*The New Testament Documents – Are They Reliable?* pp. 45,46).

4. The evidence of the witnesses is empirical, it is based on observation and experiment and not on theory. This is particulary impressive as it is the very kind of evidence which this modern age demands. These early disciples tell us that they saw Christ for themselves, and, as already mentioned, on one occasion more than five hundred people saw Him at once. They also heard Christ speak to them and, in fact, the two walking to Emmaus talked with Him for more than two hours. Then, too, they actually touched Christ. Mary Magdalene and the others, 'held him by the feet' (Matthew 28:9). Their three highest senses – sight, hearing, and touch – were all involved. What they saw was real.

5. The witnesses corroborate each other. The general rule in law is that the testimony of one witness is sufficient to prove the existence of a fact. However, corroboration,



while not essential, is always desirable, as it can turn a probability into a certainty. This is what we have here; the evidence of John, Peter, Thomas, James, Mary Magdalene, Paul and others as to how they met the risen Christ. Each telling the same thing in his or her own way, the evidence of one backing up the evidence of others.

6. The witnesses for the Resurrection include men and women of outstanding character, whose evidence would be accepted in any court of law. Sometimes it is said that these witnesses were simple men and women who would believe anything. Also, it is said that Jesus only appeared to His disciples. This is simply not the case and one of the greatest witnesses for the Resurrection is the Apostle, Paul. No one can possibly say that he was simple. After all, he was a lawyer! Also, it cannot be said that Paul was one of the early disciples. In fact, he was public enemy number one of the early Church. Yet on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians there Paul met the risen Christ and, in his own words, 'Last of all He appeared also to me' (1 Corinthians 15:8). From that moment onwards Paul's whole life was changed. His conversion was thorough and enduring. Not only did he stop persecuting the early Christians, but he probably became the greatest Christian who has ever lived. He was persecuted, stoned, flogged, imprisoned, shipwrecked and finally suffered death – all for his faith in the living Jesus. In many ways, Paul is the greatest witness of all for the truth of the Resurrection.

Circumstantial Evidence

The witness of the disciples is extremely strong direct evidence for Christ's Resurrection, and it would be accepted in any court of law. Besides this direct evidence we also have what lawyers call circumstantial evidence. As we have seen, direct evidence deals with the fact in issue, namely, 'Did Christ rise from the dead?' Circumstantial evidence is different. It deals with other facts from which the fact in issue may be inferred. For example, in a murder case the evidence of a witness who saw the accused shoot the dead man is direct evidence. But evidence that the accused purchased a gun, that his finger prints were found on it and that the bullet which caused death was fired from the same gun is circumstantial evidence. In a court of law, circumstantial evidence is just as valuable as direct evidence. In fact, sometimes it is even better, as direct evidence can be more easily fabricated than a strong chain of circumstantial evidence, which is nearly always conclusive. If the direct evidence for the miracle of Christ's Resurrection is strong, then the circumstantial evidence is even stronger. There are four things which cannot be explained unless the miracle of the Resurrection took place:

1. The life of Jesus

It is extremely difficult to believe that an ordinary person could rise from the dead. But Jesus Christ is certainly no ordinary person. Even unbelievers have admitted this and have paid tribute to his teaching and character. Thus we find the well-known atheist and philosopher Bertrand Russell saying 'There are a good many points upon which I agree with Christ a great deal more than the professing Christians do'! (*Why I Am not a Christian*, Allen & Unwin).

Albert Einstein, the famous Jewish scientist, said in an interview, 'No man can deny the fact that Jesus existed, nor that his sayings are beautiful. No man can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. I am a Jew but am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene.' Then, amazingly enough, the British pop star Mick Jagger has said, 'Jesus Christ is fantastic and something to base life on'!

No one can accuse any of these of being Christians. Somehow, whilst each of them may be hostile to the Church, they are friendly towards Jesus Christ. In any court of law, favourable evidence like this by witnesses from the other side would carry great weight. Even in these days Jesus is considered unique by common consent; the the greatest man who ever lived. This being so, it is not so difficult to believe another unique thing about him; namely that He rose from the dead. Christ's teaching and life demand the miracle of his Resurrection.

2. Change in the disciples

Jesus' crucifixion was shattering to his disciples. It left them stunned, leaderless and in complete despair. All their hopes were ended. But then something happened. Suddenly these same disciples were utterly changed and became completely different. Certainly, the story of how, on the night before the crucifixion, Peter denied on three occasions that he ever knew Jesus must be genuine. No one writes this about the leader of a movement unless it actually happened. Yet some fifty days later on the day of Pentecost this same Peter risked his life by boldly telling the whole of Jerusalem that he had seen Jesus risen from the dead. Shortly afterwards Peter was imprisoned because of his stand, and eventually died for his faith in Christ. What changed Peter from the coward that he was to the great disciple that he became? Peter's answer is that he met the risen Christ. Nothing short of this will do.

Thomas had the same experience. He is the most modern of all the disciples: always questioning and looking for proof. When the other disciples said that they had seen Jesus alive, Thomas was incredulous and unbelieving. 'Unless I see I will not believe', was his reaction. One week later Thomas saw Jesus and cried out, 'My Lord and my God.' Thomas the doubter became Thomas the Apostle, and probably the first missionary to India. The change in his life was certainly not wish-fulfilment. Thomas never expected to see the risen Christ, and yet he did.

Peter and Thomas are just two among many hundreds who had the same experience. Something tremendous must have happened to transform lives in this way. The change in the disciples demonstrates the miracle of Christ's Resurrection.

3. The existence of Christianity

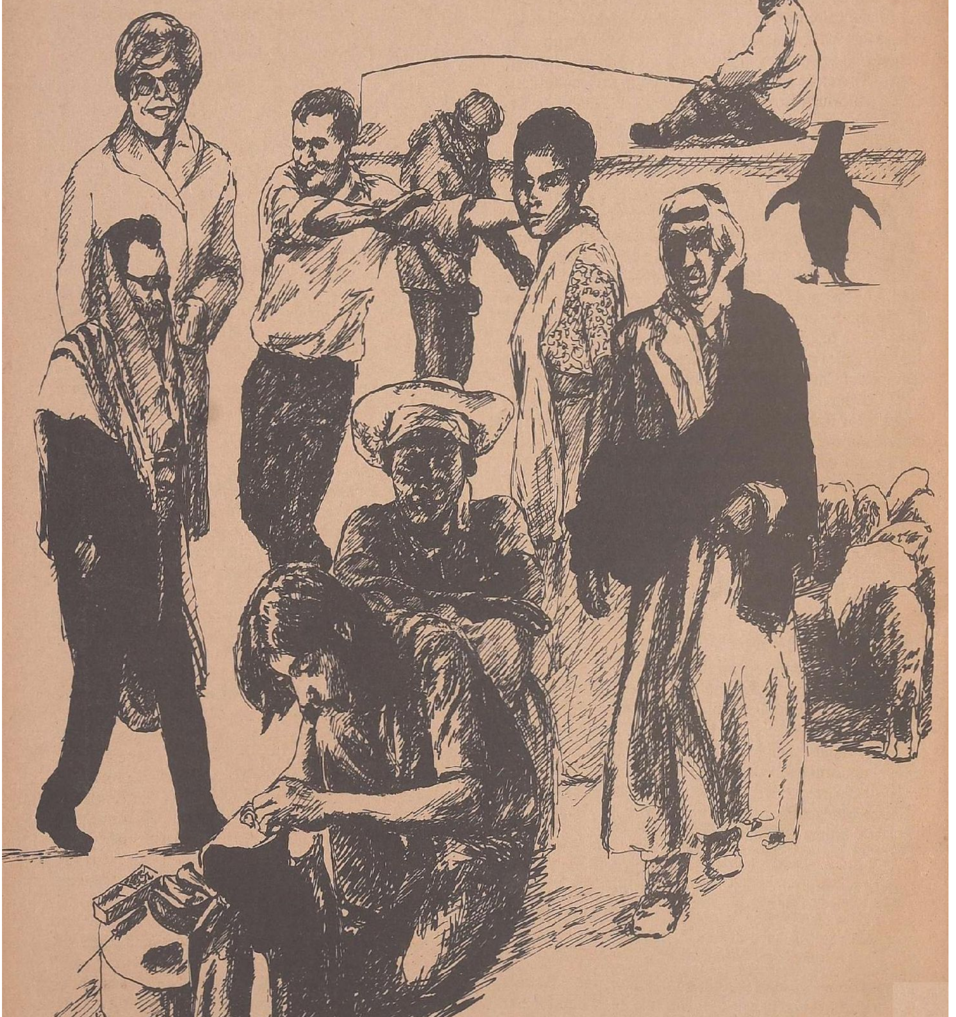
The existence of Christianity is a historical fact which demands an explanation. Any such explanation must deal with four basic facts about the early Church:

Its origin

Humanly speaking, the early disciples faced an impossible task. Within seven weeks of the death of Jesus, they began their mission to the very city that crucified Him. Jerusalem knew the facts about Christ; it could not be hoodwinked. It was the most difficult place of all. Yet it was just here that the disciples boldly proclaimed, 'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact' (Acts 2:32). Immediately upon hearing about Jesus being alive, over three thousand became Christians. Shortly after a further five thousand men believed, as well as a large number of the priests. Something phenomenal must have happened for such an impact to be made. Without the Resurrection, Christianity would never have got off the ground. The odds against it were too great.

Its members

We hear much today about racial prejudice, but this is nothing new. In fact, at the time of Christ, the prejudice of the Jews against the Gentiles was much worse than anything we have. Yet we find that the members of the early Church were both Jews and Gentiles. They were one in their experience of the power of the living Christ, so that within fifteen years of the Resurrection Paul could write to the churches of Galatia, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). How could this come about without the miracle of the Resurrec-



You are all one in Christ Jesus

tion? As Daniel Fuller has pointed out, 'To try to explain this without reference to the Resurrection is as hopeless as trying to explain Roman history without reference to Julius Caesar' (*Easter Faith and History*, p. 259).

Its worship

The Jews kept the seventh day, Saturday, as their day of worship, but from an early date the Christians kept the Sunday. This change was remarkable, especially as the early Church was made up mainly of converted Jews, who were fanatical observers of the Sabbath. What, then, lay behind this sudden change? The answer is found in an early second-century document known as the Epistle of Barnabas: 'Therefore we keep the eighth day with joyfulness, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead'. Only the Resurrection can explain the keeping of Sunday as a day of worship.

Its growth

If the Resurrection was not true, the early Church would have lost its initial momentum and fizzled out. But this is not the case. Despite tremendous persecution the early Church multiplied. Remarkable confirmation of this comes from the catacombs in Rome. The Romans cremated their dead, but the early Christians believed in the resurrection of the body and buried their dead in underground cemeteries or catacombs. Around Rome stretch six hundred miles of catacombs where during the first three centuries of Christianity nearly four million Christians were buried. It has been calculated that at that period at least one-fifth of Rome's population were Christians, and that throughout the Roman Empire in the first three centuries AD twenty million became Christians. Each of these is a witness to the faith of the early Church in the Resurrection.

To sum up, Christianity is one of the greatest movements in the world's history. It can only be accounted for by an initial impact of colossal drive and power. The existence of Christianity requires the miracle of the Resurrection of Christ.

4. The experience of Christians

From the first Easter Sunday until today there is an unbroken succession of millions who can witness that their lives have been revolutionised by contact with the living Christ. Rich and poor, educated and uneducated, people of different backgrounds, nationalities, cultures and temperaments unite in uniform testimony to the Resurrection. Those who have experienced this change include Cliff Richard and Malcolm Muggeridge, the former editor of *Punch*. Cliff Richard's testimony is that

> Christ is alive – coming to people and speaking to them and changing their lives. That is how I know he is alive; he has come to me and spoken to me and changed my life. I can say I know him, because he has changed my life; not suddenly, like St Paul, but over a couple of years
> (*The Way I See It*, Hodder & Stoughton, p.22).

In his famous sermon at Edinburgh University, Malcolm Muggeridge tells how, when he was making a film for the BBC in the Holy Land, he had the same experience. This happened, interestingly enough, while he was walking with a friend along the road to Emmaus where Jesus met the two disciples on the first Easter Sunday.

> As my friend and I walked along like Cleopas and his friend, we recalled as they did the events of the crucifixion and its aftermath in the light of our utterly different and yet similar world. Nor was it a fancy that we too were joined by a third presence. And I tell you that wherever the walk, and whoever the wayfarers, there is always this third presence ready to emerge from the shadows and fall in step along the dusty, stony way
> (*Jesus Rediscovered*, Fontana, p. 98).

Evidence like this, which could be multiplied a million times, cannot be ignored; it is contemporary and personal testimony to the power of the living Christ. Real Christianity is not ancient history but current events. Jesus is still alive today changing people's lives and the experience of Christians all down the ages confirms this.

Real Evidence

The direct evidence of the disciples that they saw Christ, coupled with the strong chain of circumstantial evidence we have just examined, amount to extremely strong evidence in favour of the miracle of the Resurrection. But to this evidence we can also add what lawyers call real evidence. In a court of law real evidence is evidence which can be produced for the inspection of the court. Goods which have been stolen or a gun which has been found on the possession of the accused would constitute real evidence. What, then, is the real evidence for the Resurrection of Christ?

One such piece of evidence could be the famous shroud of Turin. It has been submitted to the most sophisticated scientific investigation ever performed on an ancient object. Recently, it was thoroughly investigated by a group of thirty American scientists. Whilst we cannot be sure, it might be the shroud wrapped round the dead body of Jesus and through which He passed when he rose from the dead.

But the most important real evidence for the Resurrection must be Christ Himself. If Christ rose from the dead, this means that He is living today and that we can experience His power in our lives. To my mind this is the greatest proof of all. Direct and circumstantial evidence prove that it is reasonable to believe in the miracle of the Resurrection. An encounter with the living Christ takes the matter a stage further. Very often, as a lawyer, I have wished that it was possible for me to have been present when the crime took place. Then I would be absolutely sure as to what happened and would not have to rely upon the story of my client. This is, of course, impossible, but the same does not apply to Christ. If He really rose from the dead, then we can meet Him for ourselves and know beyond a shadow of doubt that He is alive and God Himself. This makes Christianity exciting. We can move from the realm of reason to the realm of experience and know Jesus for ourselves.

Your Verdict

As we saw at the beginning, a member of a jury has two duties. The first is to be unbiased, and I trust that, as I have presented the evidence for the Resurrection of Christ, you have been unbiased. The second is to give a verdict, and the time for this has now arrived. Above all the Resurrection demands a verdict. We cannot be neutral. It is either the greatest fact in the world's history or the greatest deception of all time. There is no middle ground. The most important question in the world is, 'Did Christ rise from the dead?'

In order to help you give a verdict I would like to ask you two vital questions.

1. Do you believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead?

Our original question, 'What happened to Jesus?' still stands. This is the most important question in all the world and we must find an answer. Fraud, swoon and delusion seem to have been ruled out. The only reasonable answer is that the miracle of the Resurrection took place. In fact, the evidence for this is so overwhelming that a former Lord Chief Justice of England, Lord Darling, once said that, 'No intelligent jury in the world can fail to bring in a verdict that the Resurrection story is true' (*Man Alive,* Michael Green, Inter-Varsity Press, p.54).

When putting forward the evidence myself, I have proved this many times. On one occasion a gathering of sixth-form students was presented with the evidence and, after being given an opportunity to question it and put forward opposing views, they were asked to vote. The result was that over three-quarters of this predominantly non-Christian audience voted in favour of the miracle of the Resurrection.

But this is not sufficient. I would have liked to have taken matters a stage further and have asked each of those students my second question.

2. Do you know Jesus Christ as a living Saviour?

It is all too easy to give a mental assent to the truths of Christianity without experiencing the power of Jesus in our lives. To illustrate this I often say that I believe in having a cold bath every morning. The trouble is that I never have one! The same is true about Christianity. It is not enough just to believe. If Christ rose from the dead, then He is alive today. This means that we can meet Him and know Him for ourselves. This is what it means to be a Christian; we know Christ as a living Saviour, who has changed our lives.

As you finish reading I would like you to carefully consider your verdict. This is the most important thing on which you will ever be asked to make a decision. It demands careful consideration by everyone of us. But, ultimately, as is true in every legal case, the decision must be yours. Lawyers may in court present the evidence, but every legal case ends by the judge turning to the members of the jury and saying, 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury the verdict is yours.' The same applies here. What is your verdict about Jesus?

For Those Who Want To Know Christ

If you have been convinced that Christ rose from the dead, but have never come to know Him as a living Saviour, I would like to explain exactly what it means to become a Christian. In taking this step there are two things that we need to know and one thing that we must do.

First, we need to know our need in the sight of God. If we are honest with ourselves, everyone of us has sinned against God. When I mention sin I am not necessarily referring to something like murder, adultery or theft. Jesus said that the first and great commandment is to love God with all our hearts and souls and minds. None of us have done this and this means that all of us have committed the greatest sin possible. We have left God out of our lives.

Secondly, not only do we need to know the bad news about ourselves, but also the good news about Jesus. The very heart of the gospel is that, 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4). On the cross Jesus bore our sins and He rose again on the third day triumphant over death and is alive for evermore.

Lastly, there is one thing that we must do. It is not enough to know that we are sinners and that Jesus died for us and is alive. We need to pray to this living Jesus asking Him to forgive our sins and to change our lives. I can testify from personal experience that when I did this at the age of eighteen my whole life was dramatically changed. Jesus Christ is willing to do the same for you. May I suggest that you should pray to Christ using a simple prayer such as the following:

> Lord Jesus Christ, I confess that I have sinned against you. I thank you for dying on the cross for me and that you are alive. I come to you just as I am. I want to know you in a real way. Forgive me my sin. Change my life. Reveal yourself to me and be my Saviour and Lord. Amen.

In conclusion let me offer some practical advice to those who have sincerely prayed like this and decided to follow Christ.

1. Tell someone today about your decision.
2. Believe Christ's promise when he says, 'Whoever comes to me I will never drive away' (John 6:37). If you have come to Him, He has received you. Rely on His promise, not on your feelings.
3. Find time each day to pray and read a portion from the Bible. The Scripture Union (47 Marylebone Lane, London, W1M 6AX) provides a wide range of helpful Bible reading aids and introductory booklets. A modern translation of the Bible is often a great help
4. Join a Christian Church. The Christian life was never meant to be a solitary one. You need the help that comes from Sunday worship and fellowship.
5. Begin to pray for your friends and try to win them for Christ. They too need to give a verdict.

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